March 31, 2025

Dolly Madison & The White House Fire

Dolley Madison's actions during the White House fire of 1814 have become legendary. As British troops advanced on Washington during the War of 1812, Dolley, the First Lady, famously stayed behind to save important artifacts from the White House. Among these was the iconic portrait of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart. According to her own account, she ordered the frame to be broken so the canvas could be removed and taken to safety.

However, the story has layers of folklore. Some accounts suggest Dolley personally removed the portrait, while others, including a memoir by Paul Jennings, a servant in the White House, claim that it was actually taken down by others. Dolley also saved other valuables, such as silver and red velvet curtains, which some believe were later repurposed into a dress.

Her bravery and composure during such a chaotic moment cemented her legacy as one

of the most admired First Ladies in American history.